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LEBANON, A MALFUNCTION OF THE BUREAUCRATIC PROCESS

Core Course Essay

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National Security Policy Process

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In March, 1984, the last of U.S. Multinational Forces (USMNF) pulled out of Lebanon ending two exasperating years in that country. The bombing of the Marine battalion barracks on 23 October, 1983, is the single image which is remembered most about our involvement in the Lebanese crisis. The 241 U.S. Marines who died in this tragedy and the graphic coverage in the media clearly demonstrated that our mission had failed. This was a tremendously frustrating experience for the United States. Congress blamed President Reagan, the State Department blamed Pentagon officials, and the Secretary of Defense commissioned an investigation which became extremely critical of the military forces on scene.

A detailed accounting of events relative to our efforts within Lebanon is important but that is not the focus of my article. Our involvement in Lebanon was the result of a series of political decisions made within the Reagan administration and these decisions were the result of a bureaucratic process centered on strong personalities. These individuals made a series of impulsive policy decisions which forced uncoordinated actions with disastrous results.

The dilemma for the U.S. began on 6 June 1982 when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) invaded Lebanon with 90,000 troops supported by aircraft and naval units. While President Reagan was aware of Israel's frustration with the Palestine Liberation Forces (PLO) based inside Lebanon, he was not aware of any Israeli contingency plans to invade beyond the 40 mile mark for

border security purposes.¹ The IDF was largely successful in their offensive; by the 13th they had secured the Bekaa Valley and encircled the city of Beirut cutting off 14,000 PLO fighters and a Syrian brigade. It appeared as if there was going to be a bloody battle for control of the city and those prospects brought tremendous international pressure on President Reagan to do something because Israel was a U.S. ally.

Secretary of State Alexander Haig thought the U.S. should seize the moment. He proposed the following criteria for negotiating a cease fire and peace plan:

1. Simultaneous withdrawal of Syrian, Israeli and Palestinian forces.
2. Reestablish Lebanese sovereignty.²
3. Agreement on the security of Israel's northern border.

According to Haig, these points were never explained in detail to President Reagan because of tensions between himself and William Clark, the National Security Advisor. Haig felt a sense of urgency not shared by his colleagues so he sent a message to Philip Habib, U.S. special envoy in Jerusalem, outlining the policy. What is amazing is that he sent this message without the president's knowledge or approval.³ In effect, we have now had policy guidance given without the knowledge of the president, without knowledge of Israel's full intentions, and without control of major aspects of that policy (specifically Syrian withdrawal). Any unanticipated action in any of these variables would automatically require an adjustment in our policy.

President Reagan was upset by Haig's actions and this eventually led to Haig's resignation but the president supported the three principles publicly. Philip Habib successfully negotiated a cease fire under the supervision of a U.S. led multinational force. The agreement allowed for the removal of PLO forces from Beirut and the exit of the Syrian brigade but the other major antagonists remained in place. As long as Israel and Syria remained in Lebanon, the U.S. goals (as outlined by Haig) could not be realized. The Multinational Force withdrew on 10 September and the stage for phase two of U.S. diplomatic reaction was set.

On 14 September 1982, President Elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated. The PLO fighters had been evacuated under the U.S. negotiated cease fire but their families had remained in various refugee camps in southern Beirut. The IDF took "precautionary" measures allowing Lebanese Phalangists to enter the Sabra and Shatilla PLO refugee camps to guard against any uprising.⁴ On the 16th and 17th of September the world was shocked to learn that the Phalangists had massacred more than 700 defenseless men, women, and children at these two camps. President Reagan was also shocked and reacted strongly by calling for the reintroduction of the Multinational Forces. He felt a deep sense of guilt over the massacre because under the U.S. brokered cease fire, the U.S. was morally responsible for the safety of the noncombatant families during the withdrawal of the PLO. He

addressed the nation on television outlining the new mission of
U.S. forces as follows:⁵

First and foremost, we seek the restoration of a strong and stable central government in that country brought into being by orderly and constitutional process....Peace in Beirut is only the first step; together with the people of Lebanon, we seek the removal of all foreign military forces.

The reintroduction of the U.S. Marines is understandable under the logic of temporary stability, reassessment, and exploration of diplomatic opportunities but the goals outlined in his speech were without military logic and beyond means. The Multinational Force consisted of units from the U.S., France, and Italy. All totaled they numbered close to 4500. For this force to establish peace, set up a stable Lebanese government, and remove over 80,000 foreign forces was extremely optimistic especially since there was no basic agreement among the various parties supporting these goals. While the State Department sought out this crucial agreement, the role of the Multinational Force became one of presence with the expectation of peacekeeping.

Ironically, the four month period following reintroduction of forces was noteworthy for the effectiveness of the Multinational Forces. The MNF was generally able to stabilize the situation within the city of Beirut but diplomatic efforts to end the conflict stalemated.⁶ There was a lot of frustration with the Israeli government during this time because they appeared intransigent and unwilling to cooperate with peace

negotiations. Most of the U.S. cabinet felt that Israel had misled the U.S. as to their intentions and that we should apply political pressure against them in an effort to break the stalemate.⁷ Two administrative decisions at this point set the course for phase three of the U.S. involvement in Lebanon. First, over the objections of the Marine Amphibious Unit commander, the Marines were tasked to initiate training for Lebanese Armed Force Reaction Units. Second, George Schultz, who succeeded Haig, decided to warm relations with Israel in an effort to break the negotiating deadlock. These actions increasingly identified the U.S. forces with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Israel in direct opposition to the Druse Militia supported by the Syrians.⁸ Peace keeping became increasingly difficult as the level of violence directly against U.S. institutions and the MNF escalated. On 18 April 1983, a truck bomb crashed into the U.S. Embassy in Beirut resulting in 40 dead and 17 wounded.

Through Habib, George Schultz managed to hammer out a negotiated agreement between Israel and Lebanon on 17 May 1983. This agreement called for the withdrawal of the IDF but Israel assumed there would be a simultaneous withdrawal of Syrian forces. Syria had not been included in the negotiation of the agreement and flatly rejected the proposal. Involvement in Lebanon now became even more complicated for the U.S. The Syrian rejection of a major U.S. policy goal initiated a period of further escalation of hostilities with the U.S. now seen as one of the antagonists.

The Israelis' and Phalangists were fighting intense artillery battles against the Druse Militia in the Shouf Mountains southwest of Beirut. This fighting was directly west, and within artillery range, of the international airport where the Marines were based. Consequently, the Marines came under direct artillery and mortar attack during the summer of 1983. By this point it was clear that the goals of the original Haig message and those of President Reagan's speech were well beyond the possibility of any near term effort. As U.S. losses increased, policies were adjusted and it became increasingly more difficult to withdraw. Because so much of Habib's credibility as a negotiator was staked in the U.S. mediated agreement in May, he no longer had any negotiating power in Jerusalem or in Damascus. In an effort to renew negotiation efforts, Bud McFarlane was named to replace Habib. McFarlane met with U.S. military leaders in Beirut and suggested fighting back with artillery and naval gun fire. The U.S. commanders argued bitterly against this approach but McFarlane persisted and worked approval for this action through the National Security Counsel.⁹ The Multinational Forces, especially the Marines, were now clearly positioned as the enemy.

Israel had been taking battlefield losses since starting its offensive in June 1982 and public pressure to withdraw became intense within Israel. The U.S., having tried so hard to find ways to negotiate IDF removal, now found herself in the position

of trying to keep the IDF in place until the LAF could assemble forces and take up positions in the Shouf Mountains to contain the Druse Militia. On 4 September 1983, all IDF withdrew from the Shouf Mountains creating a vacuum which was rapidly filled by the Druse. The U.S. forces were now not only the enemy, they were also in an inferior defensive position with their backs against the sea. Defense Secretary Weinberger pushed hard for the removal of all American forces but Schultz, McFarlane and the Joint Chiefs argued to stay in order to maintain influence in the area.

The constant shelling of the American position on the international airport left the Marines with a no-win situation. *They were outnumbered* and in an inferior defensive position. To increase security meant to increase patrols and defensive outposts. To do this would expose more Marines to the effects of the shelling and, therefore, increase casualties. The commander decided in the favor of safety over security and kept the battalion within the protection of the compound and a reinforced concrete building. The result was the well known bombing on 23 October.

Once again, the American people and the administration felt both shock and anger. The President promised due justice to the initiators of this bombing. Secretary Weinberger appointed the Long Commission which became highly critical of the Marine commander in Beirut. The U.S.S. New Jersey sat off shore and shelled Druse positions. A Navy air strike into Lebanon resulted in the loss of three aircraft and a POW problem. This conflict

appeared to be out of control and getting worse with no apparent end or gain to be made. Public and Congressional tolerance plummeted and their criticisms became more intense. Finally, a "redeployment" plan was initiated in January 1984 to remove all U.S. forces from Beirut.

Many people have studied the lessons of the U.S. experience in Lebanon but most write from the perspective of the sequence of events within Lebanon. The decisions which set the course for these events were made in Washington D.C. These decisions were the product of what Graham T. Allison described in his book, Essence of Decision, as a bureaucratic political process. The various members of President Reagan's cabinet saw U.S. interests in Lebanon in different ways and some were able to exert more influence than others. Those with the most influence were closely tied to the original points which Haig had laid out. The single person with the most influence was ultimately Secretary Haig. Once he sent the message outlining the three principles to Habib, the "Ship of State" was launched. Once launched, it could not alter course easily and there followed a series of policy decisions trying to regain the original goals. Alexander Haig sought to seize the moment and establish a favorable balance of power based on the Israeli military gains. President Reagan reintroduced American forces outlining objectives which were beyond the capability of the military forces on location. Schultz concluded an ill conceived agreement with Israel only to have

Israel turn around and resist when Syria rejected it. McFarlane sought to regain the initiative by means of U.S. firepower when it was no longer possible. Even with U.S. goals clearly unobtainable, there were months of delay before the administration could agree on withdrawing all forces.

Every U.S. president is faced with the challenge of organizing both the structure and the methods by which policy decisions will be made in his administration. A bureaucratic process centered in strong personalities will make decisions but these decisions will have the focus and agenda of a single individual. In foreign policy issues, especially issues involving the use of force, the bureaucratic process must be effectively coordinated at the highest level....the level of the presidency. Coordination from the top down in policy matters is the only way to ensure consistency and to avoid recurring, reactionary drills such as the U.S. experience in Lebanon.

ENDNOTES

1. Alexander Haig, Caveat (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1984), pg. 69.
2. Roy Gutman, "Battle Over Lebanon" Foreign Services Journal, June 1984: pg. 12.
3. Haig, pg. 311.
4. Richard Gabriel, Operation Peace For Galilee, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984), pg. 219.
5. John Mackinlay, The Peacekeepers (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pg. 78.
6. Interview with Brigadier General James Mead, USMC (Retired) on 18 November 1993. General Mead was the commanding officer of both the 32nd and 22nd Marine Amphibious Units in Beirut during 1982. When I asked him how he measured effectiveness, his response was interesting. He claims that the Marines were seen as effectively holding the IDF patrols out of Beirut. This was the time period when the Marine Lieutenant stopped the Israeli tank with a pistol. The Italians and French were equally effective since they opened their own medical facilities and openly patrolled streets keeping the peace. He says the best testimony to the effectiveness of the MNF during this period is that the residents of Beirut put glass back in their windows. Before and after this period that, " was a waste of glass."
7. Gutman, pg. 31.
8. Mead interview.
9. Mead interview.